Opinion: Kids should learn that being healthy is more important than losing weight

By Rebecca Scritchfield, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.20.18

Word Count **753**

Level **840L**

Weighing in: Weight Watchers has announced it will start offering free membership to teens starting this summer, and some health experts are not pleased. Photo by: Rostislav_Sedlacek/Getty Image

The company Weight Watchers has made billions of dollars helping people lose weight.

Weight Watchers announced plans to offer free six-week trials to kids as young as 13. The program begins this summer. The company's main business is helping people to lose weight.

As a health expert and mother, I am disgusted. Weight Watchers works with famous people including Oprah Winfrey and DJ Khaled. These people can have a major influence on people far and wide. Kids will pay a heavy price for this "free" trial, because it will make them feel bad about their bodies. It sends a message that some kids' bodies are "problems," and if you're at a higher weight, your body needs to be fixed.

Weight Watchers focuses on weight, not health. When the focus is on weight instead of health, damage is often done to people's bodies and minds.

Eating Disorders Are Very Serious

The American Academy of Pediatrics is a group of doctors focused on children's health. In 2016, they released a paper. It showed that going on a diet can lead to eating disorders, like anorexia and bulimia. People with anorexia feel terrified of gaining weight, even if they are already very thin. People with bulimia go through periods of eating extremely large amounts of food, called bingeing. Then, they make up for it by exercising or throwing up. Eating disorders are very serious and even deadly.

The doctors noted that in addition to eating disorders, dieting can lead to weight gain and obesity. Someone is obese if they weigh more than what is healthy for their body. Obesity can cause diseases like diabetes.

How could diets lead to obesity when the goal of a diet is to lose weight? The answer lies in our brains and the way our bodies naturally work.

Our bodies have a weight range they prefer to stay within. The range can be different for everyone. There is no one perfect weight for everyone. Some bodies are naturally bigger and some bodies are naturally smaller.

Diets Fail Most Of The Time

As a result, diets often fail, no matter how hard people try. The body often returns to a weight range it finds comfortable. Our bodies do this by raising our attention to food and making us feel more hungry. Dieters don't enjoy this at all. They hang on, trying to fight their hunger. Some people can fight this natural desire to eat, but not forever.

There are also psychological problems that come from dieting. People who diet often feel worse about how their bodies look. This makes them seek the next diet as the answer. The cycle repeats itself.

None of this means it's OK to ignore health problems. If your doctor has concerns about your health, it's important to find a solution. The solution needs to be based on health first, not weight. For example, if you have high blood sugar, it might be time to cut out soda and add exercise.

Thinner is not healthier for all kids. Sometimes kids do need to build healthier habits. Making them feel bad about their bodies is not the way to do it, though. In fact, making someone feel bad about their body can cause its own health problems. It can lead to stress and low self-esteem. It can cause people to struggle with bad feelings about their bodies.

Learn To Love And Respect Your Body

There are better ways to help kids improve their health. Adults should help kids learn to accept their bodies. When kids learn "your body is good no matter what," they learn unconditional self-love and respect. Where nutrition is concerned, cooking and eating together with family and friends can improve eating habits. Kids should learn to exercise because it's fun and healthy, not just a chore.

Caring adults have to make it clear that being healthy is more important than losing weight. Kids' bodies will change during their teenage years. Some kids may change their habits and lose weight. Some kids may grow in height without much weight change. Some other kids will remain at a higher weight, even with good lifestyle changes.

Weight Watchers spoke about its new program. The company said that its goal is "to help those who need healthy habits to develop them at this critical life-stage."

Is Weight Watchers really the best place to help teens take care of their bodies? I don't think it is. Let's look for a solution that doesn't start by saying "Your body is a problem."